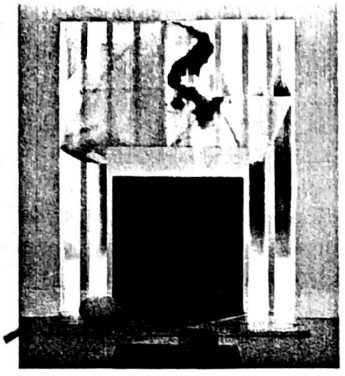
Murphy's Laws

The Dixon House

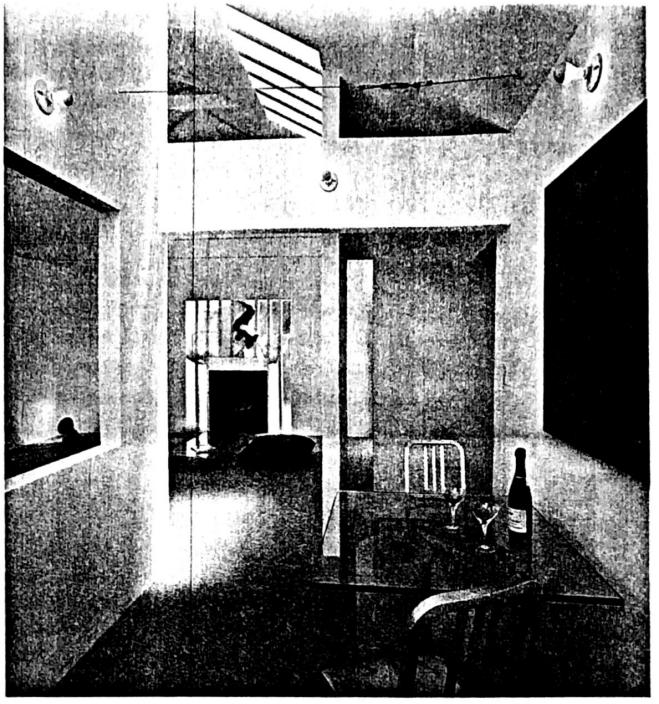
Renegade architect Brian Murphy has designs On Los Angeles.

No one would mistake Brian Murphy as a native of any place but Southern California. He pulls up to his studio in a white Rover wearing a white Brooks Brothers shirt, red sweater-vest and tie, Levis, and Ray-Bans. His sandy-colored hair is cropped close, and his face is tanned and prematurely lined from time spent in the sun. Murphy's a self- described "beach rat," a surfer, runner, and rough-water swimmer. He's also L.A.'s most celebrated renegade architect.

His studio, in an alley off Santa Monica Bolevard just three blocks from the beach, is a chaotic hive of activity. Employees bustle amid tables covered with



The Dixon House



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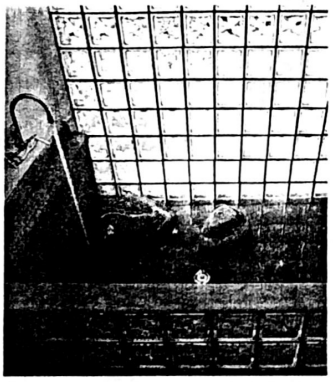


The Dixon House

samples of materials, toys, pink-painted cacti, surfing magazines, and stacks of plans and projects. "My bookkeepersays I have 23 employees, but I'm so busy I never see them," says Murphy. "I think I'm going to make them all come here at once so I can believe it."

At 36, Murphy outdistanced five other firms to win the job of renovating the landmark Huntington Hartford Theater, which was purchased last year by UCLA and the Center Theater Group. Murphy's firm, BAM Construction/Design and Architecture, is also renovating Wadsworth Auditorium and the west wing of Royce Hall. What really burned the other firms was Murphy's idea—covering the Huntington's facade with scaffolding and spotlights like a Broadway marquee. He never even submitted proper drawings, just a bunch of messy free-hand sketches. Murphy says his reality is that you can do architecture by the letter of the law, but you will get predictable results.

A determined iconoclast who thrives on personal challenges, Murphy attracts clients of a similar bent, many of them "film people"—producers and writers like Harold Ramis, Ivan Reitman, Bobby Houston, Dennis Hopper, Alan Ruckers, Kirk Francis, John Masius, and John Paragon. "I get enthusiastic, then the clients get going and see options, alternatives, see their homes can be personalized, specialized, a reflection of them. I get midnight phone calls from them: Hi, I saw some quilted aluminum on the side of a lunch truck. Can I have that in my kitchen?" ▸

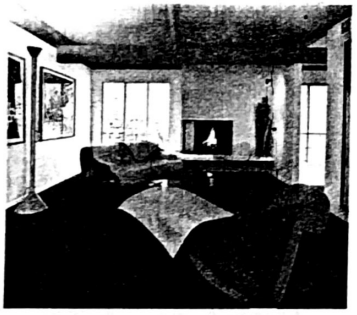
BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

The Ramis House

"Post-modern movement teachers say a building should be a jewel—forget it! This is Southern California, man, the land of facade-tecture."

The Ramis House

The Houston House



The Houston House

Not only can they have it, they can afford it. Although many of Murphy's projects have been published in prestigious journals, his services are still a bargain. "Chicken coop architecture," he calls it, "white trash modern." He uses the cheapest materials: plywood, gratings, cables, construction leftovers. He raves over Formica and asphalt shingles the way other architects praise the value of travertine marble and mahogany. "I'm not a *Beaux Arts* designer, I'm a school-of-hard-knocks kind of guy," Murphy explains. "I empathize with budgets. The rich didn't get rich by giving it away. You stick to your budget, bring your project in on time, and that impresses people.

"People *learn* what is good. There's a difference between style and fashion. Ours is an acculturated aesthetic. I'm playing with metaphors, with the acculturated parameters of what's good and what isn't."

In a corner of his office, three wooden drafting tables are stacked floor to ceiling. His desk is a "Murphy table," a fixture he created out of economic necessity that is now in demand by most of his clients: fat two-by-fours, stained a dusky red, support a glass top, and the four corners are splashed with a yellow acrylic ooze resembling drips from a giant paint brush.

But not all of his eccentric suggestions are appreciated: to one client, he suggested mounting half an Airstream trailer on the side of their Coldwater Canyon home; for another couple, he wanted to landscape the front yard in bushes that would spell out their last name in script. These clients laughed him off, but they still wanted to work with him.

After dropping-out of UCLA's architecture department, Murphy enrolled at L.A.'s Trade Technical College and took a class designed for building inspectors. Then he joined the carpenters' union and worked construction in Orange County. "I came up through construction, not academia," he says. "I was studying with professionals who had never built anything. It was all theory. After a year, I realized I didn't want to build space stations or museums, but the nuts and bolts of what J.Q. Public wants to live in."

Murphy saved enough money from construction to buy and remodel his own house, with Astroturf on the floor and one wall made of stacked sandbags. The house drew plenty of attention, specifically from Philip Dixon, a fashion photographer who hired Murphy to remodel his Venice bungalow in 1982. The living room made the cover of *Progressive Architecture.*

It's not difficult to figure out why: the house is in a ghetto, so Murphy covered the windows facing the street with green roofing shingles. The steel front door leads down a narrow, skylit corridor with a floor of metal grating laid over a bed of white pebbles. At the end of the corridor there are two more steel doors, one leading to a photo studio, the other to a pristine, Japanese-inspired bungalow. The living room is suffused with a soft light from the baffled skylights above. On the end wall, a fireplace surrounded by thick glass is topped with a huge, irregular chunk of unpolished onyx. Instead of using beams to hold up the ceiling, Murphy strung steel cables held taut by turnbuckles and swages. Furniture is minimal—lots of black folded futons and the occasional river rock. In the bedroom, another futon laid over straw tatami mats serves as the bed, facing a large window and an attached bathtub made of glass brick. The tatami mat was used as a unit of design throughout, the common measurement for the doors, windows, skylight, and fireplaces. It is utterly lovely, and surprisingly homey. "Isn't it sweet?" Murphy asks rhetorically. "Can you believe it was done for only $30,000?"

Although Murphy has done jobs for body builder Lisa Lyons, Queststar Health Club, Fiorucci, and now-defunct *Wet* magazine, he is just as proud of what he calls "Brand X jobs" like a car dealership in Irvine. "That kind of work keeps me honest, so I don't become isolated from the grassroots, which is what determines the base of any market. As long as there's some spirit to a project, it feeds me. If I'm getting off on it, it's going to work."

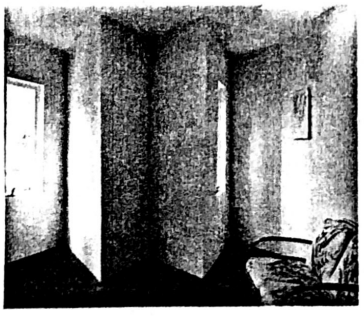
Murphy's approach, although different, is just as calculated as that of any architect. He earned his undergraduate degree from UCLA in painting and art history, so his references are often pictorial, even narrative. Another influence is

The Hooper House

"People think I'm wild. I'm conservative fiscally and I dress conservatively. I have a Brooks Brothers charge card so I can order shirts over the phone."

The Hooper House

The Rucker House



The Rucker House

his passion for sailing: his designs have portholes, railings, canvas, rope, varnished woods, and cables, even boat paint, which "costs a little more but looks great and lasts forever. It's part of my language, as are plastic, rubber, all that stuff. I celebrate it." A third component in his work is Southern California light. "I try to *wash* my rooms in light," he says. "All my skylights are baffled so there are no hard shadows."

Yet for all his architectural eccentricities, he remains ultimately practical. Robert Maguire, developer of many downtown L.A. projects, actually called Murphy about the Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill design for the Crocker Bank building. Because of the glass on the western side of the building, it was overheating in the afternoons. "S.O.M. is being paid something like $2 1/2 million and they couldn't come up with a solution," Murphy says wryly. "I went down to the Marine Hardware Store and bought some travelers and tracks—the slide-and-pulley system used to raise and lower sails. They could put the tracks along the windows with simple scrims of fabric to be raised whenever it got too hot." In other words, curtains—a solution so simple it had eluded great minds in architecture.

Murphy flips through the March issue of *House and Garden* to a picture of a Beverly Hills house. His clients had wanted a dining area that "looked like it was underwater," he explains. Murphy stained the oak floors in turquoise and replaced the exterior walls with glass brick. The chandelier over the dining table is another of Murphy's inventions: discs of shattered auto glass suspended from the ceiling by cables, the light source being black, elongated policeman's flashlights. The kitchen floor is tiled in black and white checks, and in pink fading to turquoise to match the dining room. The rooms are separated by a black marble threshold, another example of Murphy's attention to detail.

In the kitchen floor of Bobby Houston's Laurel Canyon house, Murphy set glass bricks, which are illuminated by the light and the turquoise walls of the bathroom below. He painted the modern house putty and white, with bright yellow girders, and is planning a lap pool for the narrow back yard to be surrounded by different levels of deck stained in primary colors. The floors are black Astroturf and turquoise tile, the graphic power complementing Houston's collection of art by Keith Haring and Robert Luongo. But Murphy is proudest of a desk he invented by placing the slate top of an old pool table on legs mounted in yellow tire jacks. Now all his clients want them.

When Dennis Hopper bought a Venice studio designed by Frank Gehry, the interior was essentially a plain box. Murphy angled one wall to define a route to the kitchen where the counters are covered in checked Formica, half turquoise and gray, half white and gray. The circular shower is made of glass brick. A chunky plywood staircase leads to an upstairs sleeping loft and to a balcony of plywood with a floor of open steel mesh. The spare design is complemented by the collection of early L.A. art and the heavy Spanish furniture that Hopper brought from one of his former homes, the Mabel Dodge Luhan mansion in Taos.

Murphy gets most excited about his own house, which he is building on a recessed lot in Santa Monica Canyon. He digs out plans showing a house five stories tall "to receive the daylight." It looks like a sailing ship with private bridges leading to every level. There are porthole windows, and stamped metal balconies with ship's railings surrounding each floor. Each room has French doors that open onto the balcony. The back will be covered with black asphalt shingles, the front with white boat paint, and no one will be able to mistake it for anything but a building by BAM. It is the first complete structure he has attempted from scratch. Although he says remodels are more difficult, it will be a test of his skills in three dimensionality. "It is to *die* for," he crows. And it is budgeted at $100,000.

"Budget is king. Cheap is not intrinsically bad, it is intrinsically good. Anybody can design for the Medicis. It's being able to design something like this and build it for a song that separates me from the boys. And the girls. When it's done, it will look like a million." □